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DECEMBER 10, 2014

## Is on-time completion the answer to rising college costs?

 October 10, 2014 by [stevenyoder](#)  [Leave a Comment](#)



*Crowd of college students at 2007 Pittsburgh University Commencement. Source: commons.wikimedia*

In 2011, Anne Arundel Community College in Maryland made a commitment—it would double the number of degrees and certificates that it awarded by 2020. But a significant barrier to that goal was the college’s freshman composition course, which some students didn’t pass in part because it required them to write a research paper. The school discussed dropping the research paper so more students would get through.

Stories like that show the possible pitfalls of reform efforts that push colleges to improve the proportion of students who

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graduate on time. College reform groups see having more graduates get done in four years as a key to lowering college costs and boosting the number of college-educated workers in an economy that increasingly demands them. But critics say the focus on on-time graduation is distracting policymakers from the real problems hampering higher education.

There's evidence that today's students indeed are taking longer to get through school. A 2010 [working paper](#) from the National Bureau of Economic Research found that during the past 30 years, the share of bachelor's degree recipients graduating in four years has decreased. Fewer than 4 in 10 students graduate in four years, and about 6 in 10 graduate in six years, according to a [report](#) from The Education Trust.

Staying on an extra year or two costs a bundle. A fifth-year student spends \$2000 to \$13,000 more for tuition and expenses, depending on whether they attend a private or public school—that's after financial aid. Add to those costs the student's lost year of income, and the real price of an extra year can range from \$20,000 to \$35,000 or more. Students who take longer to get through school also means fewer spots are available for incoming students.

That's why reform groups like [Complete College America](#) and funders like the Gates and Lumina foundations are focused on increasing college "productivity"—getting more students in and out on time. (Gates and Lumina also fund K-12 reform efforts like the [Common Core standards](#).) Complete College America advocates that universities take [steps](#) like requiring all students to have a graduation plan, capping the number of hours needed for a degree, giving students financial incentives to enroll full time, and encouraging them to attend year-round. Reform groups would like to see states base decisions about schools' funding levels in part on whether they take steps to improve their on-time graduation rates.

Critics say that while there's nothing wrong with those ideas, they divert attention from what's really keeping students from finishing earlier. All states but one (North

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### Commentary: For Hunger Games – Mockingjay, teens are doing the marketing

December 4, 2014

By Joan Oleck – The Hunger Games: Mockingjay—Part 1

is, for its teen fan base, a powerful lesson in marketing manipulation. For anyone not living in a cave, this third



Dakota) are spending less per student on higher education than they did before the Great Recession, according to a [report](#) this year from public policy think tank Demos. That's jacked up tuition rates for students—nationally, average tuition at 4-year public universities is up by 20 percent in the four years since 2008, according to Demos. In seven states, average tuition increased by more than a third, and in two states by more than two-thirds.

Higher costs are bad for student graduation rates. They mean more students have to work significant hours while in school, meaning less time for academics. When students work more than 20 hours a week, they're less likely to finish their degree, according to a 2003 [study](#) from the U.S. Government Accountability Office. A [survey](#) last year found that nearly 80 percent of students today are working at least a part-job during the school year, and on average they're putting in 19-hour work weeks. And higher costs mean more students work full-time in the summer, which makes it impossible for them to go full-time all year, as reformers advocate.

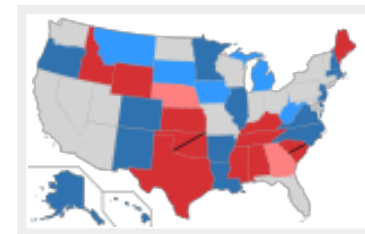
Budget cuts also can mean that students fall behind because classes aren't available when they need them. A 2010 report by the Southern Regional Education Board, a nonprofit that advises southern state educational leaders, noted that one unavailable prerequisite course can cost a student an entire year. In the 2009–2010 school year, for example, California's community college system lost a fifth of its funding. System chancellor Jack Scott told the *Washington Post* that thousands of students were being turned away from oversubscribed or unavailable classes.

The country's struggling K–12 system also impacts college completion. Only a quarter of students get to college each year with the preparation in English, reading, math, and science that they need to succeed, according to a 2014 [report](#) from ACT, a nonprofit testing service. With few students prepared, putting more of them on a four-year fast track might in fact lead to higher college dropout rates, say skeptics.

And more performance-based funding of schools might put pressure on colleges,

film in the series of four is based on the über-successful book series by Suzanne Collins and weaves a compelling tale of teen survival in [...]

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November 11, 2014

Commentary: The 2014 US Midterms – The democratic election that wasn't American democracy is predicated on two critical pillars. The selection of political representatives by the majority via the ballot box, and the availability of timely and accurate information that is vital for voters in their assessment of candidates and policies consistent with their self-interest. [...]

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particularly community colleges that deal with students who need significant remedial help, to lower their standards, argue the authors of *Community Colleges and the Access Effect*. If that happened, community college graduates might soon be less employable. Already, one study has found that “more than 35 percent of college students are making minimal or no gains in their critical thinking and writing skills over their four years in college,” as Debra Humphreys of the Association of American Colleges & Universities [puts it](#). She notes that only about a quarter of employers think colleges and universities are effectively preparing students for jobs in today’s global economy.

Humphreys concludes that students’ difficulties graduating would seem to argue for more public spending on university systems to make sure more students are matriculating well prepared for the work world. Sadly, she says, U.S. funding of higher education is going in the opposite direction, with no end in sight.

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October 31, 2014

As Myanmar, a country with an incipient democracy and alarming human rights record, prepares to host a prestigious regional issues summit in coming weeks, the Southeast Asian nation’s galling treatment of its ethnic minority populations is receiving renewed attention. It’s an inopportune time for the country’s president, Thein Sein, for these issues to be resurfacing in [...]

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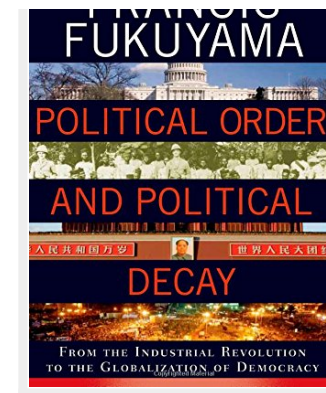
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